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Flathead Lake Findings

BY P. M. SILLOWAY, LEWISTON, MONT.

[Read before the Northern Division of the Cooper Orn. Club, Jan. 12, 1901.]

HOW frequently it happens that after we have given up active quest for a certain desideratum, we chance upon it some fine day with startling abruptness! Thus it occurred that the indefinable element we ornithologists call Luck predominated largely in the taking of my first (and only) set of *Dendroica auduboni* (Towns.), vulgarly known among A. O. U. associates as Audubon's Warbler. Upon my arrival at our camp at the northeastern corner of Flathead Lake, on June 14, the tops of the lofty pines and tamaracks were animate with the movements of this handsome warbler; and in watching the flitting visitants to a certain tree, I located a nest near the extremity of a horizontal branch, to which the parents were making trips so regularly that nothing but young birds in the nest could explain the cause of their activity. With a heavy heart I concluded that I had arrived too late to see my hopes end in fruition by taking several sets of eggs of this warbler, and that for this season at least I must be content with reading in THE CONDOR how Mr. Howard had taken them in Arizona, or how Messrs. Barlow and Carriger had found them in the Sierras.

Having left my irons at home, and having promised my wife that I should not make any venturesome climbs during my collecting trip, I paid little attention to the tops of the large pines in my daily outings, though now and then I cast covetous glances upward when any undue activity of the flitting birds or any unnatural accretion in the tufts of extended foliage arrested my sweeping examination of the surroundings. Thus I explored the region near our camp day after day, always led onward (and frequently upward) by a hope that some belated warbler might have a home in the top of one of the young

firs, into which I could peep with heart beating joyfully in anticipation of a set of eggs snugly ensconced in a downy cot. Didn't Davie say that the nests of this species are situated at various heights, ranging all the way from three to thirty feet? Surely all the Flathead warblers were not nesting in the tops of the tall pines! And surely all the Flathead warblers had not concluded their nidification thus early in the season!

There is a most gracious promise, of most wonderful application, and I fancy how often the eager collector, as he further pursues his yet bootless quest, yields to the dreary monotone of his inward mentor, "seek and ye shall find", until all previous disappointments are effaced in the gratifying moment that he looks into the nest and reads in letters of rosy tinge, *fresh*. You see that at last I get to the point.

With varying fortune the days came and went, until the 27th of June dawned. I had ceased my yearning after the seemingly unattainable, and had got down to the quest of a pair of *Porzana carolina* (Linn.), "O, what a fall was there, my countrymen!" Hearing the chick-like chirping of a pair of passing *Coccothraustes vespertinus montanus* (Ridgw.)—Fellows will understand this to mean the Western Evening Grosbeak—and seeing them hurrying rapidly overhead as if a nest might be the objective point, I dropped further operations against the Soras, and struck a line through the dense growth of slender willows fringing the lake, in hopes of chancing upon a nest of *Coccothraustes*. From sheer force of habit I scanned the willow canopy, and had scarcely entered the growth, when a suspicious-looking grayish mass in a fork of one of the stems caught my eye. Giving the trunk a half-hearted

stroke with my gun-barrel, I was surprised to see a small bird flit downward and away among the willows, though I had presence of mind to catch her in the farther limit of the "twilight noon" of the swamp woods. Stooping to examine my prize, I realized that *Dendroica auduboni* stock was soaring skyward, and depositing the mortal remains of Mrs. auduboni in my collecting basket, I made haste to ascend a neighboring stem, as I feared the one holding the prize might bend under my weight

length I stood on terra firma below with my treasures safe and sound. In descending I measured the stem with a two-foot rule, and found the distance from the ground to be eighteen feet. The fork containing the nest was in a main stem, upright, a number of feet below the leaf-bearing part of the tree, so that the nest was exposed quite fairly to view.

The nest is figured in the accompanying illustration. It stands two and one-fourth inches in height, and averages

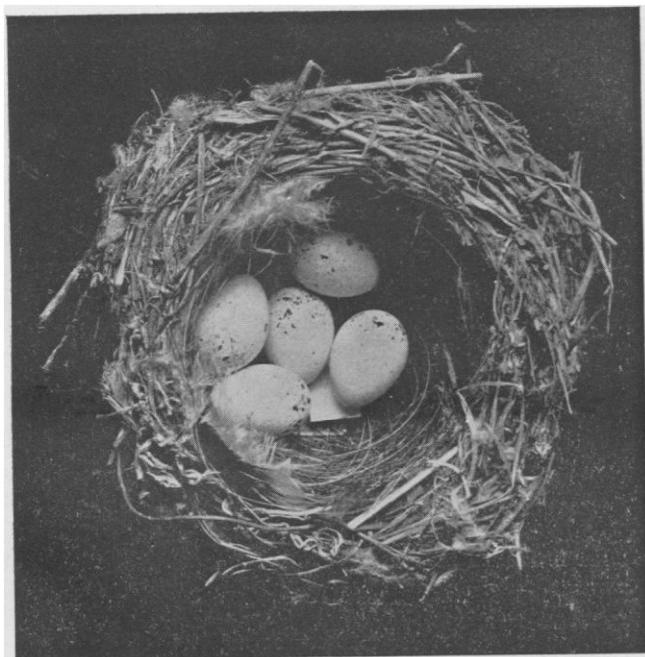


Photo by Prof. M. J. Elrod.

Nest and Eggs of Audubon's Warbler

and spill the contents of the nest before I reached it.

When about half way up to the nest, I had to strap the stem I was climbing to the one containing the nest, and thus with little difficulty I was enabled to reach the prize and gaze into its recesses. Five eggs! My trembling hand could barely transfer them one by one to the cotton of the collecting can, but at

three and one-fourth inches in diameter. The rim of the cavity averages two inches in diameter, and is somewhat smaller than the diameter of the space below. The depth of the cavity is a trifle more than an inch and one-half. The exterior of the nest is made of coarse materials, such as weed-stems, grasses, and bits of vegetable down. It has a nice lining of horsehair on soft

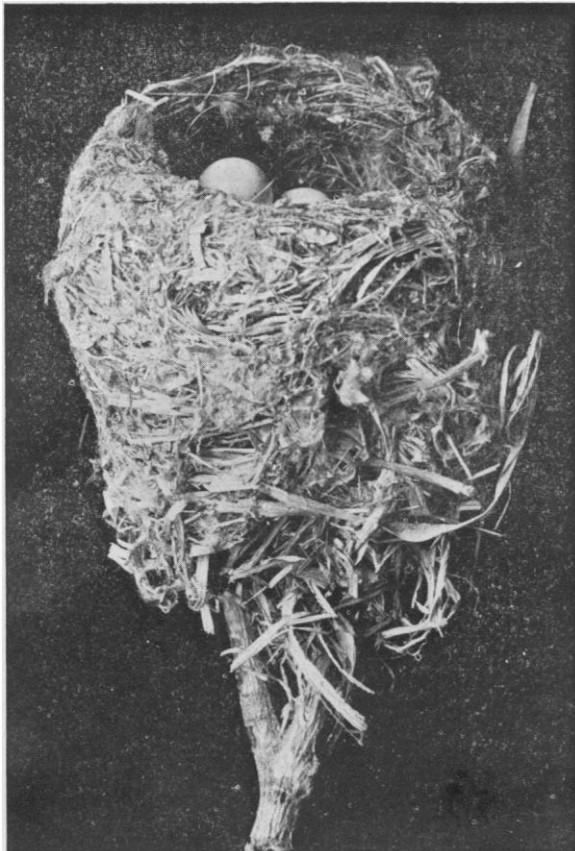


Photo by Prof. M. J. Elrod.

Nest of *Empidonax wrightii*.

feathers, the latter being worked into the walls so that their soft extremities project into the cavity and curl warmly along the upper portions of the wall. The eggs have a ground of grayish white color, marked chiefly at the larger end with specks and irregular dots of blackish and dark reddish brown, one or two having a suggestion of the wreath-like formation in the markings.

It is worth while to mention that during the next three days I searched the entire swamp woods extending between the mouth of Swan River and Flathead River, a space of nearly three miles, over which the willow growth averaged a width of three hundred yards, and it seemed to me that

every separate tree was closely scanned, but no other evidence of *Dendroica auduboni* was found in that locality; hence I averred that Luck was a predominating factor in the finding thus lengthily recorded.

Along the landward margin of the willow swamp mentioned in the foregoing description, there was a thick growth of bushes and small evergreen trees, consequent upon the lumberman's advent into the neighborhood. Between the swamp and the bushes, I managed to while away many a June day, and to pick up some finds which, though not important to the advanced collectors, were very interesting to one who was spending his first summer in Montana. How I pity those advanced collectors, who long ago lost all pleasure in the common friends of the woodland, and now find their only solace in a's, b's, c's,

etc., or the oological findings of the far-off islands of the sea. But to resume:

It was along the bushy margin of the swamp-woods that I first had the pleasure of meeting *Empidonax wrightii* Baird, which advanced collectors will readily recognize as the cognomen of Wright's Flycatcher. I was prying around the clumps of maple sprouts alternating with the fir thicket, when a little flycatcher flitted from a nest in an upright crotch in the periphery of the clump. The nest was only five feet from the ground, and by standing on a prostrate log I could easily peep into the cozy structure. At a glance I knew that the four creamy white eggs were strange to me, and I began to look again for the

owner, but she had wisely disappeared. We collectors know how to wait, as well as to labor; and so I ensconced myself in a convenient place and waited. Presently the owner appeared, uttering a somewhat harsh but subdued "quit," flipped her tail nervously to inform me that she was a flycatcher, and dodged behind an adjacent clump. However, at length I captured her (my Audubonian spirit prevents my saying that I shot her); nest and eggs were soon packed in my basket, and another finding recorded in my note-book.

This nest stands three inches in height, the exterior diameters averaging two and three-fourths inches. The rim of the cavity averages one and thirteen-sixteenths in diameter, the depth being one and three-fourths inches. The structure is made of gray vegetable fibers, such as soft stripings from weed-stems, with which are interwoven cottony vegetable materials and bits of gossamer. The lining is delicate grassy fibers, used sparingly, and small, downy feathers which project from the well. The illustration shows the position of the nest better than we can describe it.

It may not be amiss to say here that while my business in the Flathead region in July and August was to assist in biological work for the Montana State University, my purpose there in June was to pick up a few sets of eggs for my own little collection. You will therefore understand that when I became awake to what a treasure a common maple clump might contain, few of them escaped my earnest glance. The first nest of *E. wrightii* was taken on June 15; it was not until the 18th that I chanced upon my second nest. The locality was a high ridge east of the lake near our camp. I had wandered aimlessly onward and upward, allured by the clumps of maple that dotted the hillsides and intermediate valley. Clump after clump was examined; but at length I spied a nest that seemed promising. It was ten feet from the ground, in an upright crotch

near the top of the clump. To reach it safely I had to strap together a bundle of the light sprouts. This nest contained five eggs, somewhat advanced in incubation. In structure and appearance, it is a counterpart of the one first described.

The collector can give little excuse for taking a series of eggs and nests of *Empidonax wrightii*, upon the ground of variation, as the eggs are practically all alike except deviations in size, and the nests look much alike exteriorly. I just wanted more eggs, I suppose, (you understand the feeling, Mr. Editor), so I kept scanning the maple clumps, and on June 20 I found my third nest. It was on the same ridge where I had taken the second one. This third nest was only four feet from the ground, situated as usual in an upright crotch of maple sprout. It stands two and one-half inches high, the interior dimensions being the same as those given for the first nest. There were three fresh eggs in this nest.

What, another nest? Yes, back in the margin of the swamp-woods. Four days of further search netted nothing in the way of flycatcher's eggs, though I managed to get fair returns for the time in other ways; but on June 25 I chanced upon my last nest of *Empidonax wrightii*, which contained four eggs in which incubation had well begun. It was eight feet from the ground, in a crotch in an oblique stem of a maple sprout. The nest stands three inches high, the cavity averaging two and one-eighth inches in diameter at the rim. This nest is somewhat different from the others in its large and shallow cavity, and in the amount of felted material used in the inner wall. All the nests of this flycatcher have a considerable amount of loose material at the bottom, as an exterior foundation.



Theodore J. Hoover is spending the Christmas vacation with Dr. J. P. Smith among fossil beds near Independence, Cal. From force of habit, Mr. Hoover took a gun with him!